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Reagan Asserts SALT Decision Hasn't Been Made

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Staff Reporters of The Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON—President Reagan asserted that he hasn't made a final decision to scrap the SALT II arms-limitation treaty, and said he still hopes to draw the Soviet Union into new arms-reduction negotiations.

Speaking at a nationally televised news conference last night, Mr. Reagan said, "We'll do our utmost" to involve the Soviets in replacing the Salt II treaty "with a realistic program of arms reduction."

Mr. Reagan confirmed that the Soviets have made a new proposal during the arms-reduction talks in Geneva to curb long-range nuclear missiles. He wouldn't discuss details, citing the need for confidentiality. But he said he would study the proposal carefully.

President Reagan announced last month that he wouldn't feel bound any longer to abide by the terms of SALT II, which the U.S. has observed since 1980 even though it never was ratified by the Senate. The issue of SALT compliance will arise later this year when the U.S., in its program of equipping B-52 bombers with cruise missiles, is projected to break the accord's limit on multiple-warhead missile launchers and heavy bombers equipped with air-launch cruise missiles.

Sharp Criticism Cited

Last month's announcement produced sharp criticism from congressional Democrats, and even some Republicans, who argued that a flawed treaty is better than no limits at all on nuclear-arms growth. Last night, Mr. Reagan sought to assuage his critics by stressing that he was using his decision to back away from SALT II as a bargaining tool to coax Moscow toward the negotiating table.

"The Soviets have an opportunity to meet us now with regard to solving the very things they've been proposing—arms reduction," Mr. Reagan said. "And we will observe the constraints, to the same extent that the Soviet Union does, but we can't go on unilaterally observing this while they take off on their own with the violations that they've already made."

Mr. Reagan added that "we have several months" before making a final decision on whether to continue complying with Salt II limits.

Hope on Summit

The president also held out hope that he still will have a summit meeting this year with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. The two superpowers have been unable to agree on a date. But Mr. Reagan said: "I still believe he (Gorbachev) wants a summit; I want a summit and I believe it's going to take place."

During his news conference, Mr. Reagan denied that in a speech earlier this week he likened Mr. Gorbachev to Cuban President Fidel Castro, Palestine Liberation Organization chief Yasser Arafat and Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

"I didn't think I lumped him in with them," Mr. Reagan said. "I didn't mean to do that." In the news conference, Mr. Reagan had some kind words for the Soviet leader, citing Mr. Gorbachev as the first Soviet leader he knew of who ever voiced the idea of eliminating nuclear weapons.

In a speech to the Center for Strategic and International Studies Monday, Mr. Reagan had said all four foreign leaders supported the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. "Just as the men and women of the (Nicaraguan) resistance have decided what they must do, so too have Gorbachev, Castro, Arafat and Gadhafi," he said. "The Communists have made their decision; the resistance has made its decision."

On another foreign policy issue, President Reagan, appearing to side with the State Department, said he was satisfied with Israeli assurances that the Jewish state hasn't been conducting widespread spying operations in the U.S.

Jonathan Jay Pollard, a former U.S. Navy intelligence analyst, pleaded guilty last week to conspiring to commit espionage on Israel's behalf. Justice Department officials have been complaining about "selective" Israeli cooperation in the case, and claiming that Mr. Pollard was part of a broad, government-supported spy network. But Mr. Reagan said last night that there wasn't any evidence suggesting that such a spy ring existed.

Concerning the Challenger commission's report this week, the president said the National Aeronautics and Space Administration should replace the lost space shuttle. But he didn't say how the nation could come up with the estimated $3 billion to do so. "How soon we can get to that is a question," he said.

In the meantime, Mr. Reagan suggested building up the inventory of unmanned rockets to launch the growing backlog of satellites that would have been carried by the shuttle.

A presidential commission that investigated the Jan. 28 Challenger accident that killed all seven crew members delivered its final report to the president Monday. That report, while critical of NASA management, didn't blame individuals and didn't mention whether the Challenger should be replaced. The shuttle fleet, which now numbers three orbiters, has been grounded until NASA corrects equipment and management flaws that led to the accident.

Mr. Reagan attributed the shuttle disaster to "a carelessness that grew out of success" at NASA. But he said that he didn't believe that there was a "criminal intent" on the part of anyone involved and that individuals shouldn't be prosecuted.

President Reagan asserted last night: "It's difficult to believe there are people starving in this country because food is not available." He suggested that some people may "lack information" about what government programs are available.

The president reiterated that his administration spends "more on nutrition than has ever been spent before." And he said the government was providing 93 million meals a day.

He apparently included the school lunch program, which subsidizes only a fraction of each meal. He also apparently was calculating three meals a day for the 20 million Americans on food stamps, but their average food-stamp benefits are for just 49 cents a meal, according to Robert Greenstein, who headed food programs in the Carter administration.

Other experts say that while the Reagan administration's spending on nutrition programs for the poor has grown slightly since 1981, the impoverished population has grown much faster.

Mr. Reagan argued that his budget cuts terminated a food-benefits awareness program because "we'd rather . . . pay for more food stamps than pay for the bureaucracy to do a thing of this kind." However, in the 1981 legislation that eliminated that outreach program, food-stamp benefits also were cut.

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